Dr. Sample, honored guests, long-suffering parents and—most important—the Class of 2000… good morning.

Like countless other commencement speakers across the country, last week I began writing a speech that took advantage of the once-in-a-thousand-years opportunity to expound on your class’s unique millennial significance.

Then I got hit by The Love Bug. At first, I didn’t know if I was more annoyed by the loss of e-mail… or by the flagrant rip-off of the title of a Disney film. But, then I realized that this went way beyond mere inconvenience or copyright infringement. Apparently, a single individual in the Philippines could adversely impact Western Civilization… to say nothing of Eastern Civilization and every other civilization in between. This was really important. I looked again at my speech.

Suddenly, I felt like I was living one of those recurring school nightmares—you probably know what I’m talking about…the ones where you show up for class with your homework—and you did the wrong assignment. And the whole class is watching. And you’re standing in your underwear… at best.

So, in a panic, I picked up the phone to call Dr. Sample. I mean, when you think you did the wrong assignment, what’s the obvious solution—beg the professor for an extension.

Then I calmed down and reasoned that I had a lull week before this assignment was due and—much as I hated starting over—now I had a better idea.

Instead of speaking about the crossing of the millennial divide and all of its supposed geo-political, economic and spiritual implications, I would speak about…e-mail, just plain old everyday e-mail… well maybe not so old.

I realized that what really sets you apart is not that you’re the first class of the millennium, but that you’re the first class of e-mail. When you entered as freshmen, e-mail was just taking hold. For four years, you’ve been e-mailing friends and family… and, no doubt, professors – cyber-begging for those extensions.

E-mail sounds like a small idea but it is not. E-mail is changing our behavior, our way of interacting with people, our institutions. And, it is happening incredibly fast.

In a few short years, e-mail has become all-encompassing. It is now so integral to our existence that the Love Bug, during its brief life, is estimated to have cost the world’s economy a staggering $8 billion.

There is no question that, to a large extent, the pervasiveness of e-mail is a wonderful thing. It has democratized communication. For virtually no cost, people can communicate between remote corners of the globe. Old friends have been reunited. Strangers have become friends. Grandparents have watched grandchildren grow through weekly pictures. Researchers have shared
insights. Businesses have improved productivity. Chat rooms have allowed aficionados of everything from hieroglyphics to tofu to Dalmatians to find each other. Instant Messaging is just plain fun.

E-mail has developed its own sub-cultures. There are the minimalists who write the letter “u” for the word you. There are the anti-capitalists who refuse to capitalize any letters. There are the speed demons who seem to reply almost before you’ve clicked the Send button. And, there are the last-worders who, no matter how much an e-mail conversation seems to have been concluded, always chime in with one more thing to say on the subject.

But, e-mail is not perfect. Because it’s spread so fast, it has raced ahead of our abilities to fully adapt to this new form of communication. Consider the way we learn about traditional human interaction. It takes years to hone communication skills in a classroom, at a party, or when mingling in diverse company. It takes years to learn that there is a way to talk to your peers that differs from talking to your boss or your parents or your teachers or a policeman or a judge. And now here suddenly comes e-mail… and, to a frightening extent, we’re unprepared.

I can imagine what you’re thinking right now – what’s the big deal? People have been writing down stuff since the Rosetta Stone.

To be sure, it’s true that, for centuries, people have communicated through letters. This gave us a priceless historical record, such as the correspondence of John Adams to his wife Abigail… of Meriwether Lewis to Thomas Jefferson… of Civil War soldiers on both sides to loved ones they would never see again… of Western pioneers to the families they left behind. Whenever I read letters such as these, I am struck by their sheer eloquence and command of the English language. These people knew how to write. They knew how to communicate ideas and emotions. And, I’m not just talking about the cultured leaders, but also the average citizens.

Then came the communication technologies of the 20th century. The telephone, the radio and the television were marvelous inventions, but they all conspired against letter writing. The post office became less and less a transmitter of meaningful communication and more and more a conduit for junk mail. Increasingly, letters went straight into garbage cans rather than history books.

As a result, throughout the century, we got out of the writing habit.

Then, suddenly came e-mail and everyone was writing letters again. But, unlike the old days, when a letter was carefully written and considered and read and re-read before sealing and mailing, now we were writing and clicking and sending as fast as our fingers could race across the keyboard.

E-mail’s very virtues also make it dangerous – it’s instant, it’s global, it’s quick and it’s easy. It becomes easy to be rude, easy to use language incorrectly, easy to make stupid mistakes, easy to do irreparable harm.

Allow me to cite a few examples, going from the sublime to the ridiculous to the catastrophic.

First, the sublime: Last week, I sent a rather sensitive e-mail—if you consider our corporate earnings the day before their release as sensitive—to someone inside the company named Dan Wolf. You can imagine my surprise and dismay when, the next morning, I got a response from someone named Dana Wolfe who works at ABC News. She was wondering why she had gotten this message. Meanwhile, Dan Wolf was wondering why he had never heard from me. I had been in a rush. I had made a wrong keystroke and off it went to the wrong person. I apologized. She understood. We laughed—at least, her e-mail seemed to laugh—and I vowed to type slower in the future. Of course, the SEC wouldn’t have laughed if the earnings had leaked out or someone at ABC News had traded in our stock.
In that case, I’d be emailing this speech from Lompoc.

Now, the ridiculous: Last year, a friend of mine served on jury duty. While waiting for hours in the jury room, he established a budding friendship with a beautiful and witty, but rather eccentric woman who was the head of personnel for a Fortune 500 company. Shortly after returning to work, my friend found that his company’s chief financial officer was leaving. He sent an e-mail to his newfound juror friend asking if she had any recommendations. She responded with an e-mail that listed a couple of names and descriptions. My friend then forwarded the list to his company’s president, slapping a cover note saying in the typical shorthand of e-mail: “List from nutcase juror.” Let me rephrase that – my friend thought he was forwarding the list to his company’s president. You see, instead of clicking on “Forward,” he accidentally clicked on “Reply.” So, instead of the note going to the president, it went to, yes, the “nutcase juror.” End of a budding friendship.

Finally, the catastrophic – and the real reason I chose this subject this morning: I have noticed of late that the intensity of emotions inside our competitive company is higher than usual. I am convinced this is because of e-mail. Every fight that goes on seems to start with a misunderstanding over an e-mail. I learned early in the hard paper world of the ‘70s that when I was annoyed with someone, I should write it all down in a memo. I would then put the memo in my desk drawer and leave it there until the next day. 99% of the time, in the morning, either my anger had passed or I realized that my writing was of insufficient precision to save me from being fired. I generally then picked up the phone to talk things out with the other person. Sometimes I even saw the person face to face. It worked… most of the time.

With e-mail, our impulse is not to write and save, but to click and send. And, as my friend who liked the “nutcase juror” will attest, once we hit that Send button, there’s no going back. What’s more, our errors are often compounded by adding other recipients to the “cc” list and, even worse, the “bcc” list. I have come to believe that, if anything will bring about the downfall of a company or maybe a country, it is blind copies of e-mails that should never have been sent in the first place. Such thoughtless emails represent a destructive virus no less than The Love Bug. They can pervert healthy ambition into, literally, blind ambition. They can turn an appropriate quest for opportunity into opportunism. They can turn the sensible exercise of power into abusive power. They foment mistrust and secrecy… an ironic outgrowth of e-mail, which should be the ultimate tool of communication and openness.

I told you this was catastrophic.

Consider the mini-crisis I dealt with a few weeks ago when one Disney executive let me know—by e-mail, of course—that he was furious at another executive because of an e-mail that the other executive had sent him. I followed the paperless trail to its source and read the original offending e-mail. To be sure, it contained a somewhat sarcastic remark that clearly had hit a nerve with its recipient. But, I am certain that part of the reason that the nerve was hit so hard was because the sarcasm was amplified by e-mail.

As any drama coach can tell you, when accompanied by varied intonation and facial expressions, identical words can come across completely differently. If a person says “you dope” with a smile over the dinner table, it can be endearing. But, in the hard, cold cathode-ray light of e-mail, the same two words—“you dope”—stand there starkly and accusingly. Just as an expletive seems more shocking when it is spoken on stage, so too do words carry more impact when they are transmitted in writing. I’m afraid that spell check does not check for anger, emotion, inflection or subtext. Only we can do that.

E-mail isn’t just about speed and efficiency and information. It’s also about unscreened emotions,
about opinions untempered by body language, about thoughts unrefined by reflection, about hostility and provocation and, as we saw last week, it’s about “I love you” without the love. At its worst, it’s like talking in the shower with someone listening through the wall. In the dark of one’s room, in the late of night, in the frustration of being alone or lonely, the Send button can prove an irresistible temptation to propel thoughtless thoughts on their way to impress or titillate or even inflict pain.

Of course, people have always been careless in words and deed. But, the slowness of communication technology used to help protect us from ourselves. This is no longer the case. Yes, e-mail can be dangerous!

O K. So now you’re probably thinking this guy is crazy. He’s seen a few too many science fiction movies… watched too many episodes of “All My Children” or “NYPD Blue” or lived too long in an animated world or missed too many IPOs. Certainly, he should have taken less literature and psychology in college and more science and engineering. This all may be true.

But, I am convinced that the real significance of e-mail won’t be found in the School of Sciences, but in the School of Humanities. This is because, ultimately, it isn’t about the technology, it’s about how we use it. Almost anybody can drive a car. Where to go is the big question.

And, I believe that you, the members of the Class of 2000, are destined to teach us where to go with e-mail. You come to this task uniquely well qualified.

After all, you are graduating from USC, the university that Time Magazine has deemed College of the Year. One of the reasons USC is such an outstanding institution is because it requires all undergraduates to take a wide range of classes. I am referring to the school’s General Education program that you all probably groaned about more than once. But, thanks to the G.E. program, all of you had to take English classes and Psychology classes and History classes and Sociology classes. Consequently, you were taught not just an appreciation of good writing, but an appreciation of all aspects of the human condition. What’s more, you have spent four years in the social pressure cooker of the university environment. There is perhaps no better classroom for learning sensitivity to others than a college dorm or apartment.

This is why the entirety of your USC experience has equipped you to elevate e-mail in the 21st century.

Like John and Abigail Adams, you can find ways to use it to express genuine emotion. Like Jefferson and Lewis, you can use it to share deep friendship. Like those Civil War soldiers, you can use it to help you weather the hardships that lie ahead. And, like the settlers of the West, you can be pioneers in this medium as it only grows in importance.

But, I am not just expecting you to emulate the great letter-writers of yore. You have options they lacked. You can pick up a phone. You can get in a car. You can board a plane. As important as it is for you to use e-mail well, I believe it is equally important for you to know when not to use it. As human beings, we have written language, we have spoken language and we have body language. We must not forget to use them all. In this way, you can master e-mail and not be mastered by it. You can turn the tide. You can show the world.

You can lead the way in shunning e-mail’s darker aspects and realizing its bright potential for productive and enlightened communication in a new century and a new millennium.

As I said earlier, among e-mail’s virtues is that its messages tend to be brief. This is in stark contrast to most commencement speakers. So, allow me to combine the best of e-mail with the best of interpersonal communication by looking you straight in the eyes and mustering all the body
language at my disposal and briefly saying:

To: C1assof2000@usc.edu
Subject: Your Big Day
CC: Your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, friends
BCC: None
Message: Congratulations, good luck, communicate well and thank you very much.